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ABSTRACT

There seems to be a pendulum in the field of education that sways from one extreme to another when a teaching method is introduced. The whole language concept caught on, and phonics instruction was then considered defunct. The pendulum now in the process of swinging back is being intercepted, before it goes to the extreme of "all phonics," by a balanced approach to reading instruction. A teacher used Reading Recovery techniques in a classroom as part of a balanced reading program and notes that all but one student are reading at or above grade level. A study found that proficient readers employ a plurality of ways to read, even when given the same passages and tasks. (RS)

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READING: Start to Proficiency

by
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"I am a part of all I have read."
-- John Kieran

Reading about reading is fascinating. There is so much to learn about the subject of reading. Perhaps because what a person reads is potentially a part of them. And in that potential is personal preference. The ability to read is as vital to being an awakened member of society as rain clouds are to producing life-sustaining water. The inability to read and being without water are destructive factors to life in society and the earth.

The fact that the ability to read is important to a child's life and to his/her place in society is not disputed in the field of education. However, there has been much dispute about what method of reading instruction produces a student who can read. In a recent issue of Time magazine an article entitled "How Johnny Should Read" discusses the two opposing reading instruction contenders--whole language and phonics instruction. Whole language bases its teaching of reading on children's deducting meaning from context and the phonics route teaches sounds of letters and phonemics so that children will be able to make sense of any word they will come across. The article begins with concern about the reading experiences of two first grade girls. One girl who had learned to read via the whole language approach before starting school had difficulty when introduced to phonics in school, and the other girl had difficulty learning to read in school with the whole language approach. With tutoring in phonics, which the special education teacher objected to, the second girl learned to read in six days.

The basic premise for using the whole language approach is that children learn to read in much the same way they learn oral language, naturally. A point made in the article seems to put this premise in perspective, that is "If reading were as natural as speaking, wouldn't all cultures have written language, and would so many people in literate cultures have trouble reading?" (Collins, 81). While it is said that approximately

70% of children learn to read no matter how they are taught, that still leaves 30% who would need special instruction.

There seems to be a pendulum in the field of education that swings from one extreme to another when a new teaching method is introduced. In the mid-60's the pendulum swung to an outer limit never seen before, whole language, a reading approach that combined the work and theories of three men. A University of Arizona professor, Ken Goodman, theorized that the meaning of what is read depends on guessing words from the context and not from the spelling of the words. Frank Smith, a cognitive psychologist, linked the idea that readers do not consider every letter in a word with linguist Noam Chomsky's finding that children learn to speak through the experience of speakers in their environment. The whole language concept caught on and phonics instruction was considered to be defunk. The pendulum now in the process of swinging back is being intercepted, before it goes to the extreme of all phonics with a balanced reading approach. The balanced reading approach incorporates the A-K components which include phonics, phonemics, means of improving reading comprehension, and independent reading of good books. The inclusion of improving reading comprehension and the reading of good books are major thrusts of the whole language approach. Previous instruction of phonics relied on so called "boring worksheets" and the reading of basal readers. These attributes of whole language have enhanced both methods of instruction. Based upon the progress made by first graders during three months of observations to their classroom, the combined attributes of whole language and phonics instruction appear to be balanced and effective. A balance of instruction has been brought to this classroom by the teacher who has been trained in Reading Recovery.

Reading Recovery is a program which was designed to provide early intervention for low achieving readers before they develop faulty reading strategies or become discouraged by failure. It ignores labels. One-on-one instruction in reading, writing, teaching of decoding strategies, and self-monitoring is provided 30 minutes per day for a

number of weeks for less than a year. The success of the program depends on the teacher's guidance, close observation of the student, and word-by-word recording of reading progress (Gunning, 1996). While the above-mentioned first grade teacher did not conduct formal Reading Recovery instruction in her classroom, she did use guided reading in 5-student groups, as well as other aspects of the program. All but one of these students are reading at grade level, a few are above grade level. The multiple factors of the one below-level reading student are being monitored and worked out with tutoring outside the classroom. He has made tremendous progress and will no doubt be reading at grade level before the end of the school year. Balanced reading instruction provided by a focused, student-centered teacher will produce readers, many of whom will be proficient.

A proficient reader is one who reads quickly, comprehends quickly, and retains subject matter. The reader does this by connecting and relating ideas: within the text being read and to prior knowledge which includes previous reading and life experiences. A research article entitled "Eight readers reading: The intertextual links of proficient readers reading multiple passages (Hartman, 1995) was helpful in understanding the process of how proficiency is determined. Eight proficient readers read five passages about the Civil War silently. As they read they verbally revealed their thoughts and connections of the text to prior knowledge. The data was analyzed via three methods: cognitive psychology, semiotics, and literary theory. There were three primary stances by which readers interacted with the texts: 1) logocentric--the reader focused on the words; 2) intertextual--the reader focused on the context; and, 3) resistance--the reader measured the text against personal convictions. These stances were then positioned on a range from exteriorly influenced (endogenous) to interiorly influenced (exogenous). Three readers were logocentric-endogenous; four readers were intertextual-endogenous, and one reader was resistant-exogenous in the extreme. The finding of the last reader was quite surprising as it was my perception that a proficient reader dealt with text in an open-minded way. This does not seem to be the case. What can be said about proficient

readers is that they "employ a plurality of ways to read, even when given the same passages and tasks" (Hartman, 1995).

The more one reads, the more one becomes a good reader. However, there are people I know who love to read, myself included, who are not satisfied with the mere love of reading because they don't retain much of what they read. Invariably these people will answer "no" to the question, "Did you have phonics instructions when you learned to read?" It is enjoyable to read books and articles, but it is contentment to comprehend what you read so that as you expand your dendrite population, you can also expand your understanding of your world.

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